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| Title | Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China |
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| Citation | China Review International, 2006, v. 13 n. 2, p. 387-389 |
| Issued Date | 2006 |
| URL | http://hdl.handle.net/10722/195589 |
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Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China, by Adam Yuet Chau.
Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006. xviii, 317 pp. ISBN 0-8047-5160-9.

Book review by David A. Palmer

PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION

Published in *China Review International* 13:2 (2006): 387-389.

More than an ethnographic case study on the revival of a local temple cult in Northern China, *Miraculous Response* is an intellectually stimulating engagement with the anthropological approach to Chinese local society, politics, and religion. Through his description of the Longwanggou temple complex in Northern Shaanxi, its boss, its networks with political actors and local communities, and its festivals, what Chau unpacks is not so much an exclusively “religious” world of gods and rituals, but a dense nexus of social and political relationships which are enacted through the cultural resources of the temple.

Shaanbei (Northern Shaanxi) can be contrasted with coastal Southeast China, the popular religion of which has been most researched in two ways: first, the relative simplicity of rituals and virtual absence of ritual specialists such as Taoist priests; second, the absence of economic prosperity and ties to overseas Chinese has been no impediment to a revival in popular religion that seems to be comparable in scope and influence to what has been observed in parts of Fujian and Zhejiang, for example.

After presenting the reader with an overview of the history, society, culture, and religion of the area, each subsequent chapter treats the reader with a new concept to understand familiar themes of popular religion from a new angle. In chapter four, he describes the “communal hegemony” achieved by villagers’ mandatory (though not exclusive) worship of village deities, enforced through gossip of divine retribution against non-participants and dissenters. He then proposes a typology of five modalities of “doing” Chinese religion: the “discursive/scriptural”, the “personal-cultivational”, the “liturgical/ritual”, the “immediate-practical”, and the “relational” (p. 75).

In chapter 5, the author proposes to understand the multiplicity of textual inscriptions to be found at the temple – the steles, plaques, couplets, cliff inscriptions, poems, etc. – neither in terms of content or form, as has been privileged by most scholars, but as “text acts” which assume a “fetishistic power” not through the meaning or beauty they convey, but through their “sheer presence”, which is felt by an audience that rarely stops to read them, but nonetheless produces effects of awe, submission, recognition or legitimation (p. 97).

Chapter 7 compares funerals and temple fairs in to propose that both types of activity can be seen as “event productions” which have two aspects: a ritual-procedural or liturgical aspect, and a hosting or guest-catering aspect. Until now, most scholars have focused their analytical gaze on the liturgical aspect, with its specialists in esoteric knowledge, while neglecting the guest-catering aspect which Chau argues is actually more important to the hosts of these events, in terms of maintaining relations with both the deceased/gods and with community members. The skills and organizational procedures involved in organizing a “religious” event production are basically the same as those used in “secular” life: “volunteerism based on principles of reciprocal labor assistance, division of tasks among helpers and specialists, and the symbolic weight put on the importance of being a good host” (p. 40), as well as “a combination of paternalism and folk democracy, and a system of informal networking and contracting (e.g. the hiring of specialists) (p. 143). Chau concludes by arguing that the resilience of popular religion in the face of persecution (by the state or by orthodox religions) lies in this fact, in its “intrinsic socially-embedded nature” (p. 61), according to which most of the organization of ritual events does not require specific religious skills (for which specialists are hired).

The next chapter proposes to look at ritual through the notion of “red-hot sociality”, drawing our attention to the affective and social product of the “hot and noisy” (*renao*) or “red and fiery” (*honghuo* in local speech) co-presence of large crowds of worshippers at festivals, who share the same space and feel each other’s presence, but may not otherwise have any pre-existing social relationships or meaningful interactions. Focusing on the strong sensory dimension of Chinese religion (“the temple ground is a huge sensorium”), he proposes that in addition to examining the symbolisms and procedures of rituals, the anthropologist should “look at the modes of sociality that are generated by the convergence of people at event productions” (p. 157), stressing that “what are meaningful to the natives at ritual events are often not necessarily “meanings” lying behind “symbols” but rather aggregated sensations and affects psychosomatically experienced” (p. 163).

The remaining three chapters focus on the legitimation strategies of the Longwanggou temple in Shaanbei in its relations with the local state, as they intersect with the personal political strategies of the temple boss, Lao Wang. These strategies shed light on the role of contemporary local elites in the dynamics of what the author calls the “agrarian public sphere”. Chau rejects the thesis of popular religious revival as expression of a “community versus the state” binary opposition, preferring to focus on the “frequent mutual accommodation, negotiation, and collusion between local state agents and local elites”. Chau analyses the importance of the “local state”, as opposed to the “central state”, in applying state policy in drawing the line between “religion” and “superstition”. In Shaanbei, there has been no campaign to eradicate superstition since

the end of the Cultural Revolution. This is explained in view of the fact that local officials have much to gain from supporting temple activities which provide significant economic benefits.

Chau further suggests that temple managers have become a new type of local elite in addition to state officials and successful private entrepreneurs. He notes how people often pass from one elite group to another (especially Party secretaries and temple committee leaders), and discusses the benefits that accrue, in terms of personal influence, from being a temple leader, and consequently the factionalism that can exist for the control of temple associations. Thus temple associations contribute to the formation of a new field of power, a “channeling zone” through which the local state interacts with local society” (p. 251).

This is illustrated in the process by which Lao Wang, the temple boss, obtained legitimacy for his temple by applying for and obtaining a string of official titles for the temple or its projects: cultural relic (1982), arboretum (1988), primary school (1996); Daoist temple (1998). Obtaining these titles, and organizing other activities such as the temple fair, involved establishing patron-client relationships with different *danwei* including the police, the religious affairs bureau, the industry and commerce bureau, the credit union, etc. The author explains the transactions involved, and how Lao Wang became a power broker. He then describes how Lao Wang’s rivals/enemies try to challenge his authority through legal channels (court cases) or “dazibao” accusing him of sorcery.

Clearly written, with an engaging personal touch, *Miraculous Response* is an important contribution at several levels: it provides a detailed local case study of contemporary state-religion relations; describes the complex dynamics at work in rural elite politics in the post-Mao era; and provides a feast of new concepts and insights of broader relevance to anthropological theory.

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